



St. Luke's East Hampton Reflections from Fr. Ben

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From the Rector: Black History and St. Matthew's Chapel

February is Black History Month. A small piece of that history can be found in the story of a chapel of St. Luke's, known as St. Matthew's Chapel. The following history of St. Matthew's is taken from Lys Marigold's History of St. Luke's, Where God is Love.

St. Matthew's was a designated chapel that played a major role in the history of St. Luke's. Unlike St. Peter's, this chapel has ceased to exist as it once was. It was located just north of East Hampton village, on the west side of the start of Three Mile Harbor Road in an area that except for its proximity to town had little to recommend it, as the land was not regarded as "prime." If you look on a modern map, the parcel was across from the present Neighborhood House and this area is still designated as Freetown, although the name has disappeared from common usage.

It was in July of 1852, around the same time as the Episcopalians in the village started holding services at Clinton Academy, that another small group was making plans to worship just beyond the village boundary. In one of the oldest documents that St. Luke's has in its possession, the one-page deed or contract, called an "indenture," tells about a couple named John and Lovina Walstein of the Town of East Hampton who assigned to Mary R. Pell of Flushing, Queens, for the sum of one dollar, a 25' x 30' parcel in "a village called Freetown...fronted on a public highway called three mile harbor road." It came with the stipulation that Mary Pell "promises ...to cause to be erected and built on the premises a building suitable to be used for a Sabbath School Room – for a place of Religious or Bethel meetings and no other purpose whatsoever."

There are many tall tales about the early worshipers on Three Mile Harbor Road. Simply designated as a "non-denominational" schoolroom for religious studies, the Chapel drew three main groups to its weekly services. Since slavery was abolished in New York State in 1827, many of the attendees were freed slaves, said to have been relocated from Gardiner's Island, although there is no record of this action in the Gardiner family papers. There were also other former slaves who had moved north from Virginia to find a better life for themselves and their families. The second wave of parishioners apparently came from when Brooklyn financier, Arthur W. Benson started buying up some 10,000 acres of land from the tribal members of Montaukett Indians, so that he and his friends could develop Montauk. In what is now regarded as a "shady deal," the Indian families were offered some money to vacate, as well as a swap for a plot of land in Freetown.

The funeral of the most famous Montaukett Indian, Stephen Taukus "Talkhouse" Pharaoh, was held at the Chapel in 1879. St. Matthew's was also a haven for the very large Round Swamp Lester and Bennett families, who farmed, fished and lived nearby.

On July 29, 1852, Rev. Samuel F. Johnson journeyed to Freetown to help "lay the cornerstone" for a schoolroom and church "for a poor community of blacks & whites," with the understanding that the chapel was going to have "a Methodist influence," although Mrs. Pell herself was Episcopalian. In 1907, the Rev. Oscar Treder of St. Luke's Episcopal Church took an interest in this small chapel. He performed seven baptisms right in the Freetown chapel, and six more baptisms were done for its members at private homes. By 1913, the Vestry minutes and bulletins from St. Luke's began referring to the building as St. Matthew's rather than the Freetown Chapel.

In 1933, St. Luke's rector, the Rev. William Grainger decided that St. Matthew's needed an addition, as the entire inner space was only 16 x 23 feet. Monies were raised and the people of St. Luke's matched it, dollar for dollar. Physically, the building was described as having "wooden pews for 40-50 people, a bell in the steeple, a pot-bellied stove in back and a stained glass window behind the altar."

In 1954, the Rev. Ralph Spinner of Southampton had a dream that a Baptist Church needed to be built in East Hampton. The answer was to build another place of worship: the Calvary Baptist Church. Land was purchased in Feb. 1955, and on Oct. 12, 1958, Spinner spoke at the chapel about the kindness of Rev. Sam Davis and the parishioners of St. Luke's for letting them use St. Matthew's free of charge from 1955-58. Donations poured in and construction began, literally ending with a "march" from St. Matthew's to the site of Calvary Baptist where services started in the finished basement. For those who didn't join in the move, they simply switched over to their mother church, St. Luke's.

The last entry for St. Matthew's services was on Christmas Day, 1968, although in the early 1970's, St. Matthew's Guild was still donating money to St. Luke's. In need of extensive repairs, the Chapel was only open once a year. In 1976, the chapel was purchased by Richard C. Sage for \$500 and moved during the summer to the Maidstone Marina boatyard. Today, however, the exterior is unchanged, but the inside has been renovated for a fitness center for guests of East Hampton Point Restaurant and Spa. St. Luke's historian Lys Marigold and Father Ben are part of a local group currently working to designate St. Matthew's as a historic site and possibly move it to a new location where it can be preserved.